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THE CREATIVE ARTS AND TWENTIETH CENTURY EDUCATION

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# **HUMANITIES WORKING PAPER 28**

March 1979

## THE CREATIVE ARTS AND TWENTIETH CENTURY EDUCATION

The creative arts are a natural and inevitable response to the basic human demands for significance, beauty, coherence, permanence, and design. Taken collectively, they are an attempt to make sense and order out of the random clutter of human experience, to explore the resources of the human mind and body, to sensitize and discipline the imagination, to widen the range of human perception, and to create value where none existed before. In less exalted language, the arts teach people to see, hear, feel, move, and act (in both senses of the term); they concern themselves with the quality of life.

Since the arts involve a continuous re-examination of human values, they crucially affect, and are affected by, the cultures that produce them. In a sense they define the quality of a civilization. It is no accident, then, that the social, technological, and intellectual revolutions of the twentieth century have redefined the position of the arts in society, produced new art forms and new techniques, and given a profound urgency to the problems of education in the arts.

Of the many social forces that have affected twentieth century art, perhaps the most obvious is urbanization and the astounding growth of cities. This growth has meant that most Americans are now living in what might be called synthetic surroundings. In a sense, the cities themselves are artifacts. What they look like now and what they will look like in the future is a compromise between artistic perception and

economic constraint. Stated positively, the recent transformation in a city like San Diego is a reflection, in an important sense, of the citizens' taste in beauty. Stated negatively, the obsolescence and decay is a reflection of how much visual blight the citizens will hold still for.

A second force operating on the fate of the arts has been democratization. Traditionally, arts have been the monopoly of an aristocracy, whether secular or ecclesiastical. They have been financed by people with wealth and enjoyed by people with leisure. Modern industry, in producing the 40-hour week, has, in effect, made everyone a member of the leisure class (some people, alas, because they are unemployed). The patrons of the arts have become anyone with the price of a movie, theater, or concert ticket, or anyone who can find the way to a museum or exhibition; and the arts are sponsored and underwritten by such diverse agencies as school boards, college committees, county councils, foundations (both government and private), city planning commissions, citizen associations, banks, business corporations, and state governments. The average citizen, as a consumer of the arts, finds himself, perhaps unconsciously, influencing the direction that the arts will take; and a citizen who achieves any position in local government or in the educational system may find himself making direct decisions on the future of art in his community.

A third force that has transformed the nature of twentieth century art is technology itself. Such developments as the moving picture, sound recording equipment, computers, and sophisticated lighting techniques have led to the development of new art forms and dramatically

expanded the boundaries of the traditional forms. The camera, for example, has not only produced an art form of its own (and several giant industries) but it has proved an invaluable resource to visual artists in general. Similarly, sophisticated recording equipment has not only made possible the mass production of music (from Beethoven to The Beatles) but it has made modern dance, on a significant scale, possible. Again, the lighting, sound, and mechanical staging techniques now available to modern drama directors have contributed to the fluidity and effectiveness of modern play production and have widened the choice of techniques available to the dramatist. In one sense, the history of the twentieth century arts has been the attempt to exploit the new resources offered.

If the technical revolution has created new arts and expanded, complicated, and sophisticated the existing arts, it has also forced the arts to deal with grave social problems. The arts have found themselves combatting the tendency of a highly technical, highly organized culture to reduce its citizens to statistics -- to units of production or consumption. They have been compelled to counter the dehumanizing tendencies of a mechanized civilization. In their separate ways, they have insisted upon illustrating, and demonstrating, the variety, complexity, and worth, of individual human experience. The arts have also found themselves combatting the isolation of the individual, lost in a bewildering culture, as well as the alienation between cultures separated by space and time. Since the arts speak a universal language they tend to dissolve individual, class and national differences. They not only make blacks understandable to whites, longshoremen understandable to bricklayers,

bourgeois understandable to each other, Russians understandable to Americans, but also ancient Egyptians understandable to modern Israelis. As the recent Tutankamen exhibitions and the Civilization series by Lord Clark have demonstrated, the arts collapse temporal as well as physical and cultural distance.

Another social phenomenon of the twentieth century has been the emergence of the arts as a complex, powerful, interlocking economic structure. This is most obvious in the case of the popular arts but it is no less true of the traditional arts. The popular arts, such as the movies, the television, and radio, with the associated recording and pop-concert business, are clearly giant economic enterprises employing thousands of people. The traditional arts with music and dance concerts, exhibitions, legitimate theater -- to say nothing of the many self-employed individual artists -- employ thousands more; and additional thousands are employed in the many supporting crafts and in the teaching profession. The arts, from an economic point of view, may be looked upon as a vast conglomerate with tentacles reaching into many related industries. While it is perhaps too much to say that the republic would collapse if the arts "industry" quit functioning, there is no doubt that the failure would be catastrophic.

But perhaps as important as the direct economic effects of the arts are the effects of the daily esthetic judgments made, often unconsciously, by the individual citizen. There is an esthetic component (a compromise between utilitarian function and beauty) in the most routine of economic decisions, and the effects of these decisions often determine the life or death of industries. These decisions begin with birth (from the time a mother selects booties for her baby) and continue

until death (when the erstwhile baby's executors select the style of lettering for his tombstone). In between, each person selects for himself, partly on the basis of esthetics, what kind of goods and services he will buy. (Someone, after all, thought the Edsel was beautiful.) On a grand scale, as already noted, the sort of house he will buy and the sort of neighborhood that he will tolerate are functions of his esthetic perceptions. On a trivial scale, what kind of toothpaste he buys may be determined by the color of the tube or the taste of the contents. On another level of decision, his sensibilities may determine whether he buys housepaint or Bourbon, whether he gets his drama at a football game or a theater, and whether he satisfies his taste for beautiful and significant motion at a ballet or a horserace (or both). In addition to such direct economic decisions are the indirect decisions that often occur when someone switches a TV channel or changes the station on his transistor. The list of such indirect decisions is virtually endless. It can be said in summary, however, that in a very important sense the citizens' esthetic sensibilities not only affect the way the country looks, sounds and moves but also the way its economy is directed.

Besides changing the nature and impact of the arts, the twentieth century has furnished the arts with their most vital subject matter. The arts are continuously engaged in interpreting the twentieth century to itself -- to paraphrase Hamlet, in dramatizing the forms and pressures of the time. This fact is so obvious that it perhaps needs no illustration, as is the parallel fact that the growing

complexities of society have tended to make the arts themselves more complex. Nevertheless, it might be useful to sketch by way of example a few points in the development of twentieth century dance. One of the most obvious of these is the turning away from classical ballet as the dance form par excellence. Though beautiful and stylized and still a very viable art form, the ballet seems inadequate to interpret the emotional range and the varieties of significant movement vital to the twentieth century. The whole realm of "modern dance" with its many experiments in form, its selection of modern sounds for accompaniment and its range of moods, from despair to low comedy, is a twentieth century invention and a response to its world. Similarly the intense interest in folk and ethnic dance has widened the range of available art forms while contributing to social understanding. It should be added in passing that besides providing significant and stunning performance, modern dance has made many people at least dimly aware that nothing in the Constitution requires that American citizens must move like robots.

The educational implications of the relationship between society and the arts are as easy to draw in principle as they are difficult to implement in practice. One obvious conclusion is that the time is probably past when American society can afford to be esthetically illiterate or semi-literate. Simply from the point of view of exterior appearance and the shape of the environment, the consequences of insensibility are staggering. But more important than the social consequences of illiteracy are its effects on the quality of individual lives. While it is perfectly possible for a man who is color-blind, tone deaf, and emotionally stunted, to be a good citizen, to be financially



solvent, and even write letters to the editor, it is a tragedy nevertheless. Similarly, it is a profound human waste, on a less dramatic scale, for people to go through life half-hearing, half-seeing, and only dimly aware of the range of their own perceptions and capabilities (to go through life not playing with a full keyboard). In this connection, it is both encouraging and pathetic to see the swarms of middle-aged people enrolling in adult classes in drama, dance, music and visual arts. It is encouraging because it demonstrates the hunger for self-expression and the demand for creative activity; it is pathetic because it often reflects years of frustration and cultural poverty.

From such obvious facts it is easy to draw educational inference that every American child should have basic training in the arts and be equipped to deal, in at least a modest way, with the real world of sights, sounds, colors, and people -- with the experiences he will most certainly meet and with the esthetic choices that he will certainly make, either ignorantly or consciously. It is clear that people must be trained to deal with the world of perception and feeling as well as the equally important world of verbal and mathematical abstractions. It might be noted in passing that art education needs a new set of metaphors. The description of art courses as "enrichment" is misleading and inadequate. It suggests something nice but not essential, like caraway seeds on rolls or frosting on cake. Perhaps the new metaphors ought to suggest corrective surgery, like the removal of cataracts, the rebuilding of ear drums, and the curing of club feet.

Another modest but clear goal, on an elementary and secondary level, is that every child should be given a chance to acquire and develop artistic skills -- that his understanding of the arts should not be merely intellectual but also practical -- derived from experience. The nature of the arts makes it almost mandatory that talent in music and dance, for example, be recognized early and that years should be spent in acquiring the discipline and techniques that the arts require. It is no less important for education, however, that children who would never dream of becoming professional artists be given a chance to learn basic skills as a vital part of their education. It might be laid down as a principle, for example, that a student who goes through school without participating in drama (without playing any role but his own) should be able to sue a school board for misfeasance; and perhaps a reasonable corollary would be that a school which does not equip its students to appreciate drama more complex than Wonder Woman or All in the Family might be cited for dereliction of duty.

Since the arts are not only educational in themselves but useful in the teaching of other subjects, it is clear that further experiments should be made in addition to those already successfully tried in relating the arts with the more "academic" disciplines. That art and history, for example, are mutually supportive studies is obvious enough -- as is the connection between music, drama and literature. The not so obvious -- but real -- connections between the arts and the sciences have yet to be seriously exploited in education, though valuable experiments have been made.

In California the general principles sketched above and the need for systematic, coherent, basic education in the arts have been recognized by the State Board of Education, and the general outline of what such a system of art education would involve has been drawn up in the State Frameworks in music, drama and visual arts. As yet these frameworks have not been implemented on any significant scale because of financial limitation, but their existence is in itself an important step toward the definition of an adequate educational system.

If it is clear that the most serious deficiencies in art education lie in the primary and secondary schools (in spite of the heroic efforts of individual teachers and administrators and the excellent work being done by some fortunate and far-sighted school districts), it is equally clear that the ultimate fate of education in the arts is largely in the hands of the colleges. The immediate reason for this state of affairs is that the colleges train the teachers, both generalists and specialists, upon whom any serious improvement in the quantity and quality of art education ultimately depends. In addition the colleges have more and more taken over the role of training professional artists. It has been found by experience that the colleges have unique advantages in such training. With their devotion to both tradition and experiment and their historical perspective, the colleges have been able to develop standards of excellence and a quality of training that have improved the general level of professional competence. In California, the colleges, both public and independent, have visibly strengthened their professional staffs over the past few years; and their art faculties present a

formidable array of artistic talent. But beyond the excellence of the professional training available in colleges is the stimulating effect of the university atmosphere, with its ferment of ideas and its general collection of brains and talent. If artists are to interpret the twentieth century to itself, it is very important for them to know the intellectual currents of the age and to mix with other people who are also trying seriously to find out how the world is arranged.

Concomitant with the rise in professional training has been the spectacular emergence of colleges as centers for the creative arts, not only within individual communities but also in the country in general. More and more the colleges have assumed responsibility for presenting art exhibitions, music, dance, and drama. Besides providing an essential service to their communities, they have served as models of what can be attained, and they have given many communities their first glimpse of modern art forms.

Another vital role the colleges play is that of providing basic research in esthetic theory, and in exploring the relationship between the arts and the obviously connected disciplines of psychology, philosophy and history. That such research is necessary if sensibilities are to be expanded, if art forms are to be improved, and if experiment is to be useful rather than faddish is evident enough. It is also evident that a great deal more remains to be done in all areas of the art theory and that the associated disciplines of art criticism, art interpretation, and art sociology need further expansion.

Perhaps as important as any of these functions has been the role of the colleges in general art education -- in what might be

called the training of an educated, responsive, and intelligent art clientele. General courses in such disciplines as art history, music appreciation, theater, and dance, along with basic non-specialist courses in the performing arts have raised the general level of artistic awareness and sensibility. The result of such education has been to diffuse into all communities a group of people, as yet a minority, who are vitally interested in the progress of the arts and who can furnish the leadership necessary for community projects and for the advancement of the arts in general. The current developments in community art associations and the burgeoning of special action groups are due in large measure to the effectiveness of college training.

The progress that has been made over the past few years, particularly in the areas of college training and community activities, give reason for hope that the staggering problems that face art education in the twentieth century may be solved. Though the gap between a reasonable ideal and current practice is huge, most of the theoretical knowledge and much of the educational machinery for the solution of the problems is available. It may not be fanciful to suggest that we are on the verge of a beneficent revolution in American education -- of providing an education that actually meets the needs of contemporary civilization.